



LESSONS OF
THE HEART

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by Alessa

Prologue

Just as the Black Mountain begins to ease into gentle undulations, and the rivers adopt a slower, less turbulent pace, on the flank of a barren, wind blown mountain, one will find a hamlet of Thistleford. As the setting sun casts its warm glow on the gravel road, bathing everything in a crimson hue, the grey houses of the settlement resemble blackened outcroppings against the mountainside. The black horse-drawn carriage, carrying passengers clad in drab rags, disappears from view multiple times during its winding descent, reappearing unexpectedly in secluded spots and ultimately vanishing within a mere hundred meters of the hamlet.

The sudden twist in the road often leads to an unusual circumstance when a newcomer arrives at Thistleford. Stepping down from the carriage at the station, the overconfident traveller might inadvertently stroll out of the village, convinced that it lies in an entirely different direction. Legend has it that a mine worker, situated two miles from the village, once encountered such a self-assured passenger with a knapsack, umbrella, *The Illustrated London News*, and other tokens of civilisation and refinement. This individual was futilely trudging along the very road he had just traversed, desperately attempting to locate the settlement of Thistleford.

A perceptive observer could find solace in the peculiar charm of the surroundings, despite the initial disappointment. Desolate clefts scarred the hillside washed by endless rains, and the muddy soil exhibited displacements that resembled the aftermath of some primeval elemental upheaval rather than the handiwork of man. Midway down, a lengthy flume spanned its narrow body and disproportionately long legs over a chasm, resembling an enormous fossil from some forgotten prehistoric era. Along the road, smaller ditches crisscrossed, concealing unsightly streams in their turbulent depths that wildly flowed towards the impending collision with the expansive yellow torrent below. Scattered about were the remnants of cabins, with chimneys standing alone and hearthstones exposed to the open skies.

The origin of Thistleford predates the discovery of a lucrative pocket of lead and zinc on the nearby site by none other than a certain Mr. Baker in the spring of 1857. A swift half-hour of extracting yielded a handsome sum of five hundred pounds for Baker. With the ambition to fortify and delve further, Baker and a group of miners invested three hundred pounds in constructing a flume and tunnelling. However, the reality soon unfolded—the mine was just a pocket, susceptible to depletion like any other.

Despite Baker's efforts to penetrate the depths of the colossal mountain, the initial five hundred pounds proved to be the sole yield of his toil. The mountain grew silent about its riches, while the flume steadily drained away the remnants of Baker's fortune. After pivoting to limestone mining, then coal

mining, he followed with ventures into hydraulics, ditching, and, by gradual degrees, into running a tavern. Rumours began circulating about his increasing indulgence in alcohol. Eventually, it became common knowledge that Baker was a habitual drunkard, leading some to speculate, perhaps unfairly, that he had never been anything else.

Fortunately, the fate of Thistleford wasn't solely tied to the fate of its fortune hunters. Other prospectors embarked on tunnelling projects and discovered their own pockets of ore. Consequently, Thistleford evolved into a settlement, boasting a general store, a tavern, a post office, and two prominent families.

Periodically, its lone, meandering street found itself overshadowed by the audacious display of the latest London fashions, exclusively procured for the newly rich. This intrusion onto nature's rugged canvas only accentuated its homeliness, serving as a personal affront to the majority of the population. For them, the Sunday, accompanied by a change of linen, brought only the necessity of cleanliness without the luxury of adornment.

The settlement further comprised St. John the Baptist church, adjacent to which stood a graveyard, and a little further down the muddy road, a bank, and a carriage yard. Finally, a modest schoolhouse completed the scene of Thistleford's hamlet.

Chapter 1

Evelyn Taylor sat alone in the schoolhouse, meticulously practising her penmanship in the fading daylight. In her role as the village educator, Miss Taylor's tidy handwriting was intended to convey both moral lessons and literacy. However, on this evening, the 27-year-old teacher found herself distracted from the words on the page.

Evelyn swept her shining blonde locks over one shoulder as she leaned closer to the open copybook, attempting to focus on the phrase before her—*Riches are deceitful*. A delicate flourish of her quill pen embellished the final letter, though her heart was not in the task. Her mind drifted elsewhere as her hand moved mechanically.

Just then, a soft tapping at the schoolhouse door broke through Evelyn's reverie. A shift in the sound occurred with the creaking swing of the door, accompanied by a persistent tapping resonating from within the confines of the classroom. Her startled blue eyes met the window for a moment. In the glass, she caught her reflection—lips pressed in concentration, fair skin aglow in the fading light.

Who could be calling at this late hour? Evelyn raised her gaze from her task, smoothing her simple pinafore and pinning back an errant curl that had escaped her braid.

Little did she know the surprise waiting on the other side of the door. She rose to investigate, and there, with slight bafflement reflecting on her face, she beheld the presence of a little girl.

This small figure, clad in tattered and soiled garments, emerged as a sharp contrast against the backdrop of the day's mundane activities. Yet, despite the dishevelled appearance, the penetrating dark eyes, the coarse, unruly mane of lacklustre black hair falling over her pale face, and the bare arms and feet streaked with soil, all rang familiar to her. It was Matilda Baker—Mr. Baker's motherless child.

What could she want here, thought the schoolteacher. Tilly, as the locals called her, was a recognisable figure, known far and wide across the expanse of Black Mountain. Not yet eleven, she had acquired a reputation as an incorrigible girl, her tempestuous nature, wild caprices, and unruly conduct becoming as proverbial as the tales of her father's shortcomings. The townsfolk, in their collective wisdom, seemed to accept both Tilly's feral temperament as well as the failings of her father with a philosophical equanimity.

Tilly's confrontations with schoolboys were marked by a unique blend of fierce invective and physical prowess. Her ability for navigating the mountainous trails with the skill of a seasoned woodsman had become a well-known trait. Miss Taylor herself had previously encountered Tilly miles away from the familiar confines of home, the young girl wandering along the mountain roads, barefoot, without an overcoat, and bareheaded. Only the miners' camps along the stream willingly extended their charitable hands to supply her with food during these voluntary adventures.

Before encountering the schoolteacher, Tilly had received some prior form of protection. The Reverend Cornelius Wallace, the esteemed preacher of Thistleford, had taken the initiative to place her as a servant in the local tavern, considering it a step towards refinement. Furthermore, he introduced her to the pupils of his Sunday school. However, Tilly's temperament didn't quite align with the decorum expected in such settings.

In the tavern, she occasionally expressed her displeasure by hurling plates at the landlord and didn't shy away from sharp retorts in response to the mean and often crude jokes made by the patrons. Her presence in the Sunday school stirred up quite a commotion, disrupting the conventional dullness and calm that usually prevailed therein. This disturbance, deemed incompatible with the pristine appearance and unsullied morals of the well-bred children from esteemed families, led the reverend to make the regrettable decision to expel her from the class.

These were the events that shaped Tilly's past, and they painted a glum picture of her character when she stood before Miss Taylor. The signs were evident in her ragged clothes, unkempt hair, and bare little feet, all of which stirred compassion in Evelyn. However, it was Tilly's unwavering gaze, emanating from her bold, black eyes, that demanded respect from the schoolteacher.

"I've come here tonight," the little urchin declared briskly and boldly, her unwavering gaze fixed on Miss Taylor, "because I knew you was alone. I wouldn't show up when them other kids were around. I hate 'em fiercely, and they hates me, too. That's the truth. You're the school keeper, right? I want to be teached!"

If she had coupled the shabbiness of her clothes and the disorderliness of her tangled hair and dirty face with a touch of tearful humility, Evelyn might have mustered the customary dose of pity and nothing more. However, with the natural, though illogical, instincts of her young age, the boldness and audacity

displayed by the girl stirred something in Miss Taylor. Perhaps it was a respect that arises instinctively, though perhaps irrationally, or even foolishly, among some individuals, regardless of their station. Evelyn gazed more intently on the child as she continued, the little girl's words still flowing rapidly, while her hand gripped the door latch.

"My name's Tilly—Tilly Baker! You can bet your life on that. My father's Old Baker's, but he's drunk most of the time—that's what's his problem is. But I'm not like him, and I'm coming to school!"

With a measured and welcoming tone, Evelyn responded, "I would love to have you in my class, Miss Baker."

The schoolteacher's kind words surprised the little girl. She had grown accustomed to unjust treatment and cruelty from others, who often sought to provoke her angry impulses for their own amusement. Now, hearing acceptance for the first time, she stopped in her tracks. She began twisting a lock of her hair between her fingers as she puzzled over this unexpected approval.

The tension in her upper lip, usually drawn taut over her small white teeth, softened, and a faint quiver unsettled her expression. Her gaze dropped, and amidst the splatters of muddy soil and the pallor of her meagre diet, a tentative blush struggled to assert itself on her cheek.

"Are you quite sure, Miss?" the girl asked in disbelief at what she just heard.

Miss Taylor had no doubt, however. Every child was welcome to her schoolroom, and she told her so. "You can start tomorrow if you wish. I'll help you settle in, and then we can begin with writing lessons. I'll even give you a notebook so you can practice your letters."

The little girl flung herself forward with a sob she couldn't quite hide. Falling weakly against the schoolteacher, she held her for dear life, weeping and crying as if her heart were on the verge of breaking.

Evelyn gently lifted the anguished child into her arms and held her tightly until the storm of tears began to pass.

"I'll be good, I promise," Matilda finally found her voice. "I will learn everything you asks me to, I don't care how hard or difficult it is. You can hit me if I'm lazy, I swear I won't run away."

"I don't hit my pupils, Miss Baker," Evelyn gently brushed the hair away from the little girl's face, "and I'm confident you will do as well as everyone else in my schoolroom."

It was then that she felt a growing need to understand why Matilda had stopped attending Sunday school. Surely there must be a reason for her departure. The teacher did not yet know the cause, but hoped listening might provide understanding and a way to offer her help. Indeed, why had the girl left her Sunday lessons? What had caused her to stay away?

"Reverend Wallace said I was a wicked child. He said... he said I was a child of a drunkard, that I was rude and loud and... and... obnoshus! He said I don't wash myself and I steal from other little children. And he said that God hates me for it. If God hates me, what do I want to go to Sunday school for? Huh? Why? I don't want to be nice to anybody who hates me."

Miss Taylor offered a smile, though tinged with sadness, a compassionate understanding that appeared often on her face within the confines of the schoolhouse. In this small hamlet, Tilly was not the lone child bearing the weight of a harsh upbringing. Such sorrowful tales were all too common among the village children, and the school teacher's heart ached with understanding and compassion every time one of her little pupils came seeking solace in her arms.

After a moment of contemplative silence, Evelyn straightened herself up with a quiet and sincere sigh. She gazed thoughtfully at the forlorn figure of Matilda standing before her. "And where might your father be?" she inquired gently.

"My father?" Matilda erupted once more. "What father? I have no father. What has he ever done for me but bring hurt? He beats me when he lays eyes on me, and treats me like a dog, locking me out of the cabin. And why do the girls hates me? Tell me! What makes people say, 'Old drunkard's girl!' when I pass them by? I wish he was dead! Or I was dead... Or everyone was dead!" Fresh sobs broke from her like a torrent of unrelenting emotions.

Leaning tenderly over Matilda, Evelyn embraced her in a comforting hug. She thought for a moment after hearing such a harrowing tale from childish lips, her mind grappling with the stark reality of the little girl's tattered dress, her bare feet, and the omnipresent shadow of her drunken father.

Gently lifting Matilda to her feet, Evelyn removed the shawl from her own shoulders and draped it around the small, trembling form.

"I am proud of you for coming here and asking to attend school. It won't be an easy journey, but together we can set you on a new path. From this day onward, things will get better, I promise."

Instructing Matilda to arrive early the next morning, the schoolteacher walked with her down the muddy road, bidding her goodnight where they stood. The narrow path illuminated brightly by the radiant moon stretched ahead of them.

Evelyn stayed, watching the hunched little figure as it staggered down the road, and waited until it had passed the little graveyard and reached the curve of the hill. There, Matilda turned and stood for a moment, a mere atom of suffering outlined against the distant, patient stars.

The bitter taste of seeing Matilda walk back to the abyss of her unhappiness lingered in Evelyn's soul. Attempting to refocus on her work, the lines of the copy-book blurred into endless parallels, resembling never-ending roads over which childish figures seemed to pass sobbing and crying into the night.

The little schoolhouse, now seeming even lonelier than before. She quietly shut the door and went home.

Chapter 2

The early morning sun shone through the windows of the little village schoolhouse as Tilly made her way up the winding path. Though traces of the old defiant look shone in her eyes at times, her appearance bore signs of effort and care and her manner was tamer and more subdued. Her face had been washed clean and her raven locks bore evidence of recent struggles with the comb, in which both had evidently suffered. In this more presentable guise, Miss Taylor thought her quite pretty and charming little pupil, a much different and welcoming presence from the little, wild urchin accustomed to roaming the streets of the hamlet.

The days that followed presented trials that tested the spirit and bond between teacher and pupil, in which both played an equal role, fostering a growing confidence and sympathy between them. Under Miss Taylor's watchful eye, Tilly strived to obey and follow the rules, yet passions still simmered close to the surface. During recess in the schoolyard, slights real or perceived could ignite flames of uncontrollable fury within her. Many a playmate learned to dread encounters with the ferocious Tilly, who met taunts and teasing with claws and teeth in savage retribution. These playground squabbles often ended with wails and woes that reached Miss Taylor's ears, along with tales of torn clothes and faces scratched by the dreadful girl's wrath.

Serious divisions arose among the townsfolk on the matter of Tilly's schooling. Some saw only danger in her presence and threatened to remove their own children from her vicinity. Others stood staunchly by Miss Taylor and her educational mission, believing redemption possible even for one so long adrift. But in the end, Evelyn knew it was only through patience and understanding she could navigate the challenges of transforming a wild creature of the streets into a student capable of dignified manners and conduct.

With dedication and care, Evelyn gently guided Tilly away from the shadows of her past life. Many were evenings spent alone in the quiet schoolroom, alone next to each other, the two figures huddled close over a book or parchment of paper by lamplight, scribbling letters and practising numbers. In close proximity to one another, free from the chaos of unruly pupils, they discovered a sanctuary where teacher and student found solace and focus.

In those private lessons, Tilly's progress came to flower like a blossom in sunshine. This was the time when she showed the greatest headway and soon caught up with the schoolwork familiar to other children. What had seemed an insurmountable task became a steady, natural unfolding. Their shared journey bloomed, as if awakened by some celestial force, down the narrow path set in motion by Evelyn on that moonlit night of their first encounter. It revealed the hidden brilliance of Tilly's spirit that bloomed forth with innate curiosity, and showed the true promise of her bright mind.

Aware of the lingering impact of Reverend Wallace's inept sermons on her own faith, Evelyn steered clear of rigid dogma, which had shattered her youthful convictions like waves against shore. Instead, guided by wisdom gleaned from inner truth and that of literature, she navigated around the pitfalls that

had ensnared her in the past. And if questions still lingered, her gaze held new insight, compassion shining through once-clouded eyes.

Hers was a journey gentle yet profound, nourished not by doctrines but insights flowing quiet as a stream. It was this new understanding that elevated individuals like herself beyond the grasp of the older, wiser, and more prudent minds around her. In those lessons, a light dawned within her pupil as well, not through heavy words but through a shared quest for life's deepest mysteries. Together, teacher and student discovered reconciliation not in rigidity but in a loving and compassionate voice, illuminating all with its radiance from within.

In the quaint village, an assembly of the less fortunate locals pooled their meagre resources to clothe the once ragged Tilly in garments befitting dignity and grace. Where tatters once fluttered wild as windswept leaves, now respectable fabrics shielded her slight form from the bite of the frost and the glare of the sun.

The redemptive effect of this collective gesture did not escape the notice of the locals, who were quick to offer kind praises and heartfelt commendations. When approval for her efforts swelled from thankful townspeople, a flush would rise to Evelyn's fair cheeks. Did she truly deserve such distinction, she wondered, for guiding just one soul from shadows into light?

Nearly three months since their fateful initial encounter had seen Evelyn engrossed in work, poring over lessons by candlelight late into the evening. It was during this quiet, absorbed moment that a gentle tap resounded at her door. There, as once before, stood Tilly, but this time neatly dressed and face washed clean. Save for the long raven locks falling down her shoulders and the bright eyes that echoed the depths of her former self, little remained to remind Evelyn of the once ragged child who had crossed her path.

"Are you busy?" Tilly asked excitedly. "Can you come with me?"

"Of course, Tilly. What is the matter?"

In her old wilful way, the little girl said, "Come, then, quick!"

They passed out of the door hand in hand, and into the dark road ahead. As they entered the village, Evelyn's pace fell behind Matilda's.

"But where are we going?" Evelyn asked her in confusion.

Without slowing down, Tilly replied, "To find my father."

Evelyn had never before heard the filial title pass Tilly's lips during all their months together since she first stepped inside the schoolroom. His name had intentionally remained unspoken, a silence that Evelyn keenly noted. Until now Tilly had maintained a resolute distance from him, and calling him "Father" struck a contrast to the previous use of "Old Baker" or some even brusquer terms.

Sensing the significance of the event but refraining from questions, Evelyn put trust in their bond and followed her lead with passive acceptance. Silently she went where Tilly led, stepping down the

shadowed alleys, through hidden corners, and into the dim-lit realms of gambling halls and foul dens filled with vulgarity and smoke swirling all around.

Hand in hand, the unlikely duo of child and schoolteacher crossed the grimy path of seedier districts few dared trespass. Tilly fixated on the sordid scenes unfolding before her, uncaring of reeking smoke and shouts of blasphemous outcries. Her search alone consumed her. Holding Evelyn's hand, the little girl stood and anxiously gazed, absorbed in finding her father.

Amidst the revelry, some patrons, spotted Tilly and called out to the child, urging her to sing and dance for their amusement. Attempts were made to even force liquor upon her, and only Miss Taylor's vigilant intervention thwarted their vile depravity. Others, recognising her in mute silence, made way for them to pass through the jubilant crowd.

An hour slipped by before Tilly leaned in to whisper in Evelyn's ear that there was a lone cabin on the far side of the creek. Apparently, it could be reached by the lengthy flume, where she said her father might still be found.

It was a difficult half-hour trek across the winding creek, and they remained hopeful until the end, but all was in vain. Only emptiness greeted them in the cabin's sparse shelter.

On their return journey, tracing the path along the ditch at the mining flume's abutment, their eyes were fixed on the distant lights of the hamlet across the creek. Suddenly, a sharp gunshot pierced the clear night air.

Tilly, accustomed to such sudden noise, turned towards the gunshot's resounding echo. It cut through the still air, its loud discharge setting the dogs barking all along the Black Mountain's meandering canyons and streams. The night, once filled with drunken revelry, now held an unexpected threat, as the rebound of that sharp bang lingered in the air, casting a shadow over the tranquil mountain landscape.

A spectral dance of lights unfolded on the village's periphery. The nearby stream rippled beside them, and a few loose stones dislodged themselves, tumbling down the cliff face into rushing waters below. The heavy wind, like an unseen force, surged through the branches of the sombre pines, casting an uneasy feeling to the nocturnal scene. Then, as if a shroud of silence descended, thicker, heavier, and deadlier, a profound stillness covered the landscape.

Evelyn instinctively turned towards Tilly, with a reflexive gesture of protection. However, in the blink of an eye, the child had vanished.

Battling an odd sense of foreboding, Evelyn hurriedly descended the trail towards the riverbed. Bravely moving from boulder to boulder, she reached the base of Black Mountain, lining the fringes of the village. Midway across the junction, she paused, her breath caught in a moment of awe. High above, on the precarious narrow flume, the solitary figure of her little pupil flitted swiftly through the darkness, a ghostly silhouette against the night sky.

Breathless, Evelyn climbed the steep bank with resolve and followed the meandering lights that danced about a central point on the mountain. As she approached, a crowd of overwhelmed and sorrowful men

materialised in the gathering gloom. Emerging from the midst of this mournful assembly, the little girl took her teacher's hand and led her wordlessly towards what appeared to be a ragged gap in the mountain's side.

Tilly, once energetic and spirited, now appeared pale and serene. The air of excitement had evaporated, replaced by a demeanour that suggested the culmination of some long-anticipated event—an expression that, to Evelyn in her bewildered state, seemed almost like relief.

The cavern's crumbling walls bore reminders of a life now passed. Held in part by decayed timbers, they loomed around them like a deserted tomb. Tilly gestured towards what seemed to be discarded and tattered clothes, abandoned in the recesses by the previous occupant.

Approaching cautiously, Evelyn bent over the forlorn remnants. There lay Mr Baker, his life force already drained, a cold stillness in his dead eyes. In his lifeless hand, a pistol, and in his heart, a fatal bullet, while beside him, the hollow void of his empty mine echoed the despair of his final moments.

Chapter 3

The spirit of the Reverend Wallace lingered heavily in the rugged mountain passes. His sermon concerning the deceased man's unwise folly at taking his own life resonated more profoundly through the mine shafts and tunnels that crisscrossed the Black Mountains than amongst the inhabitants of Thistleford.

Rumours circulated that Tilly in her pursuits had struck a vein of fortune at last in the form of Miss Taylor, her schoolteacher. As a new grave joined the ranks within the small cemetery overlooking the hamlet, it was Miss Taylor who saw to it that a slender board with an inscription graced the site, paying respectful tribute to the deceased.

The local newspaper, *The Black Mountain Banner*, took note in their article, paying honour to the memory of "one of our earliest miners," while subtly alluding to Wallace's evaluation of Tilly's reformed nature. It wrapped its eulogy tactfully, consigning the departed man to the annals of the past.

Throughout the solemn funeral, little Matilda clung tightly to her dear schoolteacher, refusing to loosen her desperate grip on Miss Taylor's hand. Her only support in a sea of indifference, Evelyn held Tilly just as close to herself, never letting go even for a moment as they stood beside the freshly turned grave.

The absence of tears in Tilly's eyes surprised no one. The little orphan now had only one other person who showed a kind interest in her well-being. Her large eyes would often look up at Miss Taylor as if beseeching for affection and reassurance, hoping she won't cast her aside like everyone else has done throughout her short life.

"He leaves an only child to mourn his loss," said the epitaph on her father's grave, "who is now an exemplary schoolgirl, thanks to the efforts of the Reverend Cornelius Wallace."

Reverend Wallace, ever zealous in his righteousness, steadfastly emphasised Tilly's supposed redemption from her past sins. Before the congregation of Black Mountain Sunday School, he boldly suggested the burden of her father's tragic demise rests at the feet of the unfortunate child. His Sunday school lessons, filled with touching allusions to the redemptive virtues of the "silent tomb," took a morbid turn. In his sinister contemplation, he unwittingly plunged most of the children into speechless horror, rendering the pink-and-white scions of the first families inconsolable, while making their disconsolate cries to echo through the church halls.

The long, dreary summer dragged on, each stormy day fading into the next beneath a dreary whiffs of pearl-grey smoke drifting across the distant mountain peaks. As the unrelenting sun faded, autumn's first winds began to wave dry grass over Baker's lonely grave site on the hill, bleaching the green life from the mound of earth that once swelled proudly above the man's resting place. With time, the grave grew as desolate as the parched landscape, enveloping Thistleford under a steady downpour that seemed to have no end. All around, nature reflected the despairing mood that had gripped the small community.

In those days, Miss Taylor, strolling through the quaint little churchyard on a leisurely Sunday afternoon, was sometimes surprised to discover a few wild flowers plucked from the damp pine forests and scattered there. More frequently, however, she observed crude wreaths adorning the cross of Baker's barren plot. Most of these wreaths were woven from fragrant grasses which the children loved to keep in their school desks, intricately entwined with chestnut plumes and rose hips, the guelder rose, and the wood anemone. Here and there, Evelyn even noticed the ominous dark-blue cowl of the monkshood, or deadly aconite. There was something peculiar in the presence of these poisonous plants with the solemn memorials, which stirred a painful sentiment within the schoolteacher.

One afternoon, as Miss Taylor picked her way alone across a forested ridge, she stumbled upon young Tilly in the heart of the forest. Perched high among the boughs of a fallen pine, amid hanging drapes of branch and needle, the girl sat enthroned upon a mossy seat, her lap overflowed with a collection of grasses and pine nuts. Lost to her surroundings, Tilly hummed softly an old gypsy melody she overheard in her younger days.

Spotting her schoolteacher from a distance, Tilly's face lit up with a radiant smile. She promptly made space for Evelyn on her makeshift throne with a grave attempt at hospitality and patronage—a conduct of such serious regard that it might have been comical had it not been so sincere.

In her new role as a gracious hostess, Tilly politely offered her honourable guest bilberries and wild apples plucked fresh from the forest floor.

"But Matilda, some of these are quite poisonous plants," Evelyn seized the opportunity to gently caution about the dangerous nature of some of the plants, specifically the monkshood, whose dark blossoms was deadlier still than its beauty.

"Are they indeed?" asked Tilly in wonderment while gazing upon the enchanting yet treacherous plants in her lap. "They look so pretty. I only want to play with them and make wreaths for my father."

With warmth and worry in her voice, Evelyn implored her, "Promise me you won't gather these plants again. It's dangerous to play with them, and I don't want something to happen to you. You're dear to me, Tilly, you know that, don't you?"

"I've never been dear to anyone, Miss Taylor, not even to my father," the little girl said, bewildered by her teacher's kindness. "Are you quite sure you like me?"

"More than ever in my life, Tilly. Don't ever doubt it," reassured Evelyn, and placing her arm around Tilly, she drew her nearer, coaxing a promise from the young girl not to meddle with dangerous plants for as long as she remained her pupil.

Chapter 4

One home that Reverend Wallace offered Tilly, after the passing of her father, was that of the Wilson family. Known as one of Thistleford's new rich, the Wilsons had made their fortune in recent years and lived with four children of their own in a spacious home just across from the general store on the main street. Mr. Wilson's reputation as a philanthropist preceded him, with his name becoming synonymous with charitable activities throughout Thistleford, while Mrs. Wilson often held church gatherings and helped with communal events. On the surface, they appeared more than equipped to take in another child.

However, The Wilsons, despite their apparent affluence and community involvement, faced an unforeseen obstacle in their wish to adopt Tilly. Mr. Wilson, unbeknownst to the public eye, had a medical condition that required significant ongoing treatment and attention. This condition, although not immediately apparent to others, placed an additional burden on the family in terms of time, emotional energy, and financial resources.

Given this undisclosed challenge, the Wilsons reluctantly concluded that they were unable to provide the necessary care and support that Matilda required, especially considering the responsibilities they already had with their four children and Mr. Wilson's health condition. In their desire to act responsibly and ensure the well-being of all involved, the Wilsons had to make the difficult decision not to pursue the adoption of Tilly, despite their initial inclination and the positive aspects of their family life.

Faced with the unexpected hurdle of the Wilsons being unable to adopt Tilly, Evelyn weighed her options carefully. Recognising the shortage of suitable families in the village and driven by a genuine concern for Tilly's well-being, Evelyn decided to take matters into her own hands.

However, Reverend Wallace, a sole executor of the communal settlements, remained unmoved by Evelyn's heartfelt desire to shelter an orphan in her home.

"Such endeavours never end well," he reasoned. "Spinsterhood and child-rearing rarely bears salubrious fruit."

In an attempt to sway the Reverend's unyielding stance, Evelyn remained undeterred. "I intend to bring someone to help us with the household duties and chores." However, even as Tilly, brimming with joy, flung herself at Evelyn with the force of a small hurricane, Reverend Wallace's resolve remained unshaken.

"Such a practice would turn our parish into a spectacle. It can not be done," he asserted firmly.

"True, my home may be modest, and my income meagre, but Tilly would have everything befitting a young girl. Can you not find it within yourself to bring happiness into an orphan's life?" Evelyn implored, her determination unwavering. She believed more than ever that she could offer Tilly the best environment for her growth.

In spite of the challenges and Reverend Wallace's resistance, Evelyn's decision to take Tilly into her own home reflected her genuine care and determination to provide a nurturing family setting for the young girl. But more crucially, Evelyn's growing attachment to the unlikely pupil who stole into her heart played a significant role in her unwavering resolve.

But as Evelyn tried to assuage Reverend Wallace's concerns by expressing her belief in their ability to create a loving home with the resources at hand, the clergyman remained resolute in his decision.

"You spend the entire day surrounded by children in the schoolhouse. Why would you willingly subject yourself to the presence of yet another urchin living in your quarters? No, no, this is out of the question. What Miss Baker truly needs are siblings and both parents to instil some discipline into the wretched creature," he grumbled while speaking into his chin. "I'll tell you what. Why don't you look after her for a day or two until I find a more suitable home for her? That should give you ample time to grow tired of her obstinate antics." And with that, he departed in the direction of the rectory.

The following day saw Evelyn and Tilly making their way to Baker's cabin nestled at the foot of Black Mountain, concealed amidst the undergrowth beside a small stream and an old chestnut tree. The cabin, no more than a single room with a bed and a solitary straw mattress left on the floor, presented a desolate sight. Scattered candles, pots, and chipped cups were the only signs of human habitation. How did Tilly survive in these conditions remained a mystery.

After rummaging through the cabin, they gathered the few sparse valuables belonging to Tilly. There wasn't more than could be carried in a shoulder bag. A pencil, a pair of worn-out shoes, some tattered clothes and a straw hat with a hole in its rim were packed alongside a torn volume of poetry that had somehow found its way into her possession.

Evelyn knelt down beside Tilly and placed a reassuring hand on the young girl's shoulder. "These are all you have, Tilly?" she asked with a worried look in her eyes.

Tilly nodded silently, her eyes downcast in embarrassment. Evelyn lifted the girl's chin gently, seeking to dispel her shame. "Don't worry. From this moment onward, things will take a turn for the better. Once we find you a home, you'll lack for nothing ever again."

Touched by Evelyn's words, Tilly's eyes welled with emotion. "But I want to be with you, Miss Taylor. I promise I'll work hard and not be a bother."

A kind smile played upon Evelyn's lips. "You could never be a bother, Tilly. I can't make Rev. Wallace change his mind, but we'll still see each other every day in the school. Now, let's gather your belongings and bring them to your new home. There you'll have your own bed and meals to fill that empty tummy."

Tilly cradled the worn book of poetry lovingly. "At least I still have my book of rhymes."

"And it shall remind you that even in the darkest times, there is still beauty in this world," said Evelyn softly. "Now, come along; there is much to be done."

Having brought home everything they could carry, Tilly gazed in wonder at the cosy cottage that was to be her new home. Though small, it was filled with warmth and light that stood in stark contrast to the dreariness of Baker's cabin.

That evening, as the sun descended, Evelyn showed Tilly around, from the tidy kitchen to her new bedroom, furnished simply with a small bed and a soft quilt. "It's not much, but it's yours for now," Evelyn said gently.

Over a supper of vegetable stew and bread, Tilly listened with rapt attention as Evelyn shared stories of her students from years past.

"Everyone eventually leaves the village once they finish their classes," she remarked, with a hint of melancholy tinging her words. "They all move to larger towns, or get married and leave."

"Will you never get married?" asked Tilly with innocent wonder.

"I'm married to my school, Tilly. My pupils are my family," she said after a pause. "They need me more than anyone else."

Chapter 5

Mrs. Eliza Marsh, a woman of West Midlands charm, once known as the English Rose in her younger days, promptly offered her assistance to Reverend Wallace as an eager guardian for the care of the village's newest orphan. Despite being one who staunchly resisted her own natural inclinations, Mrs. Marsh, through a course of self-sacrifices and hardships, had finally tamed her inherently carefree disposition in favour of principles or order, which she deemed as "Heaven's highest law".

She could not, however, entirely control the habits of her own offspring, even if her own routines were impeccably maintained. Occasionally, her son James raided the cupboard between meals, and Harry returned from school without shoes, abandoning them at the doorstep for a carefree walk down the ditches. Agnes and Charlotte were equally indifferent to the state of their clothes. With only one exception, despite Mrs. Marsh's efforts to trim and shape her own matured elegance, the younger generation emerged defiantly wild and unruly.

That lone exception was Amelia Marsh. At thirteen, she embodied her mother's immaculate ideals of neatness, orderliness, and unremarkable dullness.

After eventually having Tilly settled in the Marshes residence, Mrs. Marsh held a charming inclination to believe that Amy could serve as both a solace and a role model for Tilly, encouraging the two girls to spend time together. Embracing this misconception, Mrs. Marsh proposed to Miss Taylor that Amy should be held up as an example for Tilly during her less refined moments, positioning her before the child for admiration. Therefore, it came as no surprise to Evelyn when she heard that Amy would be attending school, seemingly as a favour to the schoolteacher and as a model for Tilly and others.

Amy, being quite the young lady, inherited her mother's distinctive features and, in defiance of the climatic norms of the Black Mountain region, blossomed early. The youth of Thistleford, unaccustomed to such a rare flower, observed fervently her every appearance. Enamoured schoolboys lingered around the schoolhouse at dismissal, and a few even harboured jealousy towards Miss Taylor, the schoolteacher, for reasons unknown.

Perhaps it was this latter circumstance that prompted Evelyn to notice something else. She couldn't help but observe that Amy was a fanciful and capricious child. In school, she demanded a great deal of attention, consistently had damaged pens that needed fixing, and followed her requests with an expectation that exceeded the service she verbally required. Sometimes, she went so far to allow the curves of her slim, white arm to rest on Evelyn's when writing her copies. This episode always followed with profuse blushing and tossing back of her blond curls.

Evelyn generally steered clear of Amy. However, one evening, Amy returned to the schoolhouse after realising she had forgotten something. Searching aimlessly for a great deal of time resulted in no discovery that would calm her inconsolable feelings. The quest dragged on for so long that eventually, Evelyn had to walk her home and leave her in the care of Mrs. Marsh.

This event did not go unnoticed, because behind a window, Tilly's small face watched disapprovingly her schoolteacher escorting someone widely known as an insufferable attention-seeker. Needless to say, she disliked it greatly.

The morning after this poignant episode, Tilly was absent from school. Noon arrived, but Tilly did not. When questioned, Amy revealed that they had set out for school together, but the strong-willed Tilly had taken a different route along the way.

The afternoon rolled in, but Tilly did not make an appearance.

In the evening, Evelyn paid a visit to Mrs. Marsh, whose motherly instincts were genuinely alarmed. Mr. Marsh had spent the entire day searching for the wilful child, but no trace had emerged that might lead them to her discovery. Ten-year-old Harry was called in as a potential accomplice, but the disinterested youngster managed to convince the entire household of his innocence.

Mrs. Marsh couldn't shake the lingering fear that they might find the child drowned in a ditch or, almost as dreadful, muddied and soiled beyond the redeeming powers of soap and water.

Sick at heart with fear for Tilly, Evelyn eventually returned to the schoolhouse. The night had already fallen, and as she lit her lamp and seated herself at her desk, a note in Tilly's lively handwriting caught her eye. It appeared to be penned on a leaf torn from an old diary notebook and, perhaps to deter any impudent tampering, sealed with an improvised candle wax seal. Opening it with a sense of urgency mingled with affection, Evelyn read the following:

Dear Miss,

If you read this, I am run away. Nevar to come back. NEVAR, NEVAR, NEVAR! You can give my glass beads to Mary Thompson, and my buk of rhymes to Grace Jennings. But don't you give anything to Amy Marsh. Don't you dare to. Do you know what my opinion is of her, it is this, she is perfekly disgustin little pig. That is all and no more at present from

*Yours respectfully,
Matilda Baker*

Evelyn sat in quiet contemplation, her mind pondering on the enigmatic letter that lay before her. Outside, the moon lifted its face, casting its radiant glow upon the distant hills, and the path leading to the schoolhouse, beaten quite hard with the coming and going of small feet.

As the night grew old, a sense of contentment settled within her. Prompted by the early bird song, she gently folded the passionate little note and placed it like a cherished memory within the folds of her pinafore.

The first light of dawn saw Evelyn make her way through the dense underbrush of the pine forest. Pale fingers of light pierced the gloom between the towering trees. The lush vegetation, reminiscent of palm fronds, crunched beneath her feet, stirring a hare from its mossy nest. Pressing on down the wild and overgrown path, she soon reached the wooded ridge where she had once encountered Tilly.

The fallen pine, its branches covered with tassels, lay prostrate like a regal monarch in repose. However, the gnarled throne now lay abandoned. Drawing closer to the splayed branches resembling grasping fingers frozen in time, her noise betrayed the presence of a small animal. Startled, it made its way through the underbrush, bursting forth with a crackle and rush. Scaling the fallen tree, it quickly found refuge amidst concealing foliage.

Reaching the familiar seat, the schoolteacher discovered Tilly's old throne still radiating warmth. Gazing up into the intertwining branches, she met the gaze of her wayward pupil, whose shining obsidian eyes mirrored the sulking frown on her tired face. A silent exchange ensued in defiance of a

smile on Evelyn's lips. As unspoken words lingered in the air, it was Tilly who, at last, broke the silence.

"What do you want?" she asked curtly.

Evelyn had decided on a course of action. "Please, Tilly, I would like some berries and wild apples," she said humbly.

"Sha'n't have 'em! Go away." Tilly sulked, ever broodingly. "Why don't you get 'em off Amelia?"

"I am hungry, Tilly. I have eaten nothing since lunch yesterday because I was worried about you. I am famished!" and the young woman, in a state of remarkable exhaustion, leaned against a nearby tree.

Matilda's heart felt a pang of sympathy. Being accustomed to hunger from the bitter days of her vagrant life, she recognised the sensation her teacher so artfully feigned.

Moved by the heartbroken tone, though still harbouring a hint of suspicion, Tilly reluctantly conceded, "Dig under the tree near the roots, and you'll find lots. But don't tell anyone about it. It's my secret place," she added in a hushed tone.

Evelyn, weakened by pretend hunger, attempted to uncover the hidden treasure beneath the roots but proved unsuccessful, the effects of hunger probably clouding her senses. Tilly grew uneasy at the sight of Evelyn's crafty struggle. Her little face eventually peered through the leaves in an impish way.

"If I come down and give you some, will you promise not to scold me?" she asked.

Evelyn promised.

"Hope you'll die if you do?"

Evelyn fearlessly accepted the prospect of instant death as a forfeit.

With nimble grace, Tilly slid down the tree, and for a few quiet moments nothing transpired but the munching of the apples.

"Do you feel better?" Tilly asked after a while, with some concern.

Evelyn, now revitalised, confessed to a new sense of exuberance. Gratitude welled within her as she acknowledged Tilly's nourishing kindness. "You saved my life, Tilly. I'm forever thankful to you."

Embracing her tenderly with a warm hug, Evelyn rose from the forest floor, bid her goodbye and started walking down the woodland path where she came from.

As she expected, she hadn't ventured far before Tilly called out her name. "Please, don't go," a small voice pleaded behind her. "Everyone leaves me, and now you leave me, too."

Evelyn turned back to find Tilly standing there, pale, tears glistening in her wide-open eyes.

Sensing the right moment had come, Evelyn returned to her side. Taking both her hands in hers, and looking into Tilly's tearful eyes, said gravely, "Tilly, if you're angry with me, I want you to know that I never wanted to hurt your feelings. You are dear to me, and I love you very much."

"Then why do you care about Amy?" Tilly asked, her gaze fixed on the ground. "You like her more because she's pretty, and I'm not as pretty as her."

Evelyn smiled at the childish reasoning. "I care about all my pupils, Tilly, and it's not because one is prettier than the other. Besides, I think you're a prettier and smarter girl than most, and I like you the most. But I still have to help others when they get into trouble."

A moment of silence passed between them. Lifting Tilly's chin with her finger, Evelyn looked into her eyes. "Do you remember the first evening you came to see me?"

A nod of her head. Tilly remembered.

"You asked me if you might come to school. You wanted to learn about things and be better, and I said—"

"You... you would love to have me in your class," responded the child through her tears.

"What if I came to you now and said I was lonely without my little scholar, and wanted her to teach me how to be better?"

The child hung her head in remorseful silence, tears tracing delicate paths down her cheeks. In the stillness that followed, Evelyn waited patiently.

Tempted by the quiet, a small rabbit ventured close, lifting its bright eyes and velvet forepaws as it sat and gazed at the unfamiliar scene. Meanwhile, a squirrel scampered halfway down the furrowed bark of a fallen tree, pausing to cast a curious gaze in their direction.

"We are waiting, Tilly," Evelyn whispered, looking at the forest animals, and a smile graced the young girl's face. Stirred by a passing breeze, the treetops swayed, allowing a long beam of light to steal through their tight-knit branches and fall on the hesitant face and wavering little figure.

Suddenly, Tilly seized her teacher's hand in her spontaneous, quick manner. What she whispered into Evelyn's ear remained scarcely inaudible, but in response, Evelyn gently brushed the black hair away from Tilly's forehead and planted a tender kiss on her parted lips. Her arms enfolded the little girl in a tight embrace, wishing only one thing—never to let her go.

Chapter 6

Somewhat less spiteful in her interactions with other schoolchildren, Tilly maintained a lingering resentment towards Amelia. The seeds of jealousy, it seemed, were not entirely quelled within her passionate little heart. Perhaps, the source of her hostility was rooted not just in envy, but also in the easy target that Amelia's rounded curves and taller stature provided for her occasional outbursts of

malice. But while the schoolteacher's efforts to curb such misbehaviour was effective most of the time, Tilly's enmity occasionally found new and irrepressible form.

In her first assessment of the child's character, Evelyn couldn't understand that Tilly would possess something as delicate as a doll. But like many who professed expertise in educational matters, observation proved more instructive than assumption. Unbeknownst to Evelyn, Tilly did have a doll—a smaller copy of herself that was categorically Tilly's own.

The doll's pitiful existence had remained secret until accidentally discovered by Mrs. Marsh. It had been the dependable companion from Tilly's old life of wandering the mud-soaked paths at the edge of human existence. It bore unmistakable signs of wear and neglect. The elements had long since erased its original complexion, and the stains of its hard life broke out like scars upon its ragged dress and dirt-caked skin.

Much like Tilly in her earlier days, the doll appeared worn and forsaken. Clad in a solitary gown of faded fabric, now dirty and tattered, it appeared wretched and abandoned, mirroring the destitution Tilly herself had experienced. Not once did Tilly show any tenderness or childish terms of endearment to her doll. She never played with it in the company of other children. Instead, she stowed it away cruelly in a hollow tree near the schoolhouse, allowing it only brief respite during her solitary rambles. In fulfilling her solemn duty to the doll by treating it as she would herself, Tilly subjected it to a life devoid of love or kindness.

In a commendable act of generosity, Mrs. Marsh yielded to a maternal impulse and bought another doll for Tilly. The child accepted this new companion sombrely, regarding it with brooding curiosity and intrigue. Looking at the doll one day, Evelyn discerned a faint resemblance in its round rosy cheeks and gentle blue eyes to Amelia's familiar figure. As time unfolded, it became apparent that Tilly had also detected this similarity. In response, she subjected the doll to various unorthodox treatments, including hammering its waxen head on rocks when no one was watching, and at times, dragging it to and from school by a string tied around its neck. On different occasions, she placed the doll on her desk, transforming its patient and inoffensive body into a makeshift pin-cushion.

The reasons behind Tilly's peculiar actions remained a question. Whether motivated by a desire for revenge due to Amy's perceived intrusion into her life or influenced by an intuitive understanding of certain heathen rituals, leading her to believe that the wax representation could fade away, remained a metaphysical mystery.

Yet for all of Tilly's unusual behaviours, Evelyn could not help but notice the child's keen mind at work. The little pupil approached tasks with a restless vigor that knew no hesitation or doubt typical of childhood. Her responses in the schoolroom bore a subtle tinge of audacity. While not infallible, her courage and daring in venturing beyond her own depths and those of her fellow students who floundered around her, eclipsed any errors in judgement.

Children, it seemed, were no different from adults in this regard. Whenever Tilly's confident little hand shot above her desk, a hushed wonder descended upon the classroom. Even Evelyn, at times, found herself questioning her own experience and judgement in the face of Tilly's precocious contributions.

Nevertheless, certain traits that initially captivated Evelyn's imagination now began to stir unease in her heart. It became increasingly apparent that Tilly exhibited hints such as revengefulness, insolence, and a rebellious, defiant nature. Amidst the attributes of her feral impulses, however, two stood out. One was a remarkable physical resilience coupled with a capacity for self-sacrifice, and the other was a respect for truth. Tilly was both fearless and sincere, courageous and honest, creating a curious quality where these traits became synonymous.

The schoolteacher had spent many late nights pondering this conundrum by lamplight. In solitude, she was forced to acknowledge her long-held prejudices, seeing now how they clouded her judgement. Confronted with this internal struggle, Evelyn resolved to seek advice from Reverend Wallace.

The decision carried a tinge of humility, for the relationship between Evelyn and Reverend Wallace was not characterised by friendship. Yet, with thoughts of Tilly and the memory of their first encounter lingering in her mind, Evelyn couldn't ignore the notion that perhaps more than chance had guided her resolute steps to the schoolhouse. Determined to demonstrate rare tolerance, she swallowed her pride and decided to visit Reverend Wallace.

Upon her arrival, the reverend greeted her warmly, noting that the schoolteacher appeared lively and expressed hope that she had overcome a recent bout of cold. Reverend Wallace, in turn, shared his own troubles with a lingering malady, ascribing it to his old age. However, he had found solace in rest and prayer, a remedy he was quick to commend.

Taking a momentary pause, he listened to Evelyn's explanation of a specific method for easing the ailments of old age. Once satisfied, he readily proceeded to inquire about the well-being of Mrs. Marsh.

"She is a true adornment to Christianity, with a growing and promising family," he affirmed. "And that well-mannered young lady, Miss Amy."

The reverend's admiration for Amy's alleged virtues stretched into a lengthy monologue, leaving Evelyn in a state of exasperation. Firstly, the unspoken comparison between the commendable Amy and the less fortunate Tilly cast a shadow over the conversation. Secondly, his tone when discussing Mrs. Marsh's firstborn bordered on an uncomfortably intimate familiarity.

Failing to come up with an appropriate response, Evelyn made feeble attempts at sustaining conversation before feigning a commitment that allowed for a swift departure. The original purpose of her visit remained unfulfilled.

This unexpected disregard for her visit and indifference to Tilly's plight might have unwittingly returned the teacher and her pupil to the closer affinity and understanding that they had once shared. The little girl, well attuned to the subtle shifts in her schoolteacher's bearing, sensed the change in Evelyn's manner, which had of late been constrained.

During one of their leisurely afternoon walks in the wild meadows, Tilly suddenly stopped. Mounting a tree stump to reach Evelyn's height, she fixed her with an earnest gaze in her big, searching eyes, as if looking for something exceptionally important on her teacher's face.

"You ain't mad?" asked the little girl, with an interrogative shake of the two black braids.

"I'm not mad, Tilly."

"Nor bothered?"

"No, nor bothered."

"Nor hungry?" Evelyn understood that hunger was to Tilly a terrible sickness that might attack a person at any moment.

"I just had breakfast, Tilly. I'm not hungry."

"Nor thinking of her?"

"Of whom, Tilly?"

"That horrid, spoiled girl."

"I wouldn't be thinking of anyone else while I'm with you, darling."

"Upon your word?" This was a more ladylike substitute for "Hope you'll die!" proposed to her by Evelyn.

"Yes, upon my word."

"And sacred honour?"

"Yes."

"Then you must love me!" declared Tilly triumphantly. "Well, do you?"

Evelyn was momentarily lost for words. Was it so clearly obvious even to a child? "Of course I love you, darling."

"More than anyone else in the entire space?"

"It's the Universe, Tilly. Yes, I love you more than anyone else in the whole Universe."

Then Tilly gave her a fierce little kiss on her lips, and, hopping down from the tree stump, fluttered off like a little butterfly, while Evelyn remained behind with a blissful smile on her face.

For two or three days after that event, Tilly agreed to appear more like other children, and be, as she expressed it, "good."

Chapter 7

Four years had passed since Miss Taylor's arrival in Thistleford, and with a modest income and uncertain prospects for the hamlet's growth, she found herself contemplating a change. The notion of transitioning from the familiarity of Thistleford lingered in her thoughts.

On one occasion, she had privately informed the school trustees of her intentions. Yet, in an era where well-educated young women of impeccable moral standing were a rarity, Miss Taylor, with her characteristic integrity and dedication, agreed to extend her term through the winter into early spring. This was a commitment that remained unknown to anyone except her only confidante, Miss Robinson, the young shopkeeper in a small town of Stowgate.

This decision was kept hidden from the prying eyes of Mrs. Marsh, Amy, and Evelyn's little pupils. Evelyn's restraint stemmed, in part, from her inherent modesty and aversion to creating unnecessary fuss. This was a manifestation of her desire to avoid the probing questions and speculative gossip driven by vulgar curiosity. Additionally, there lay a pragmatic aspect, for she held a belief that actions spoke louder than words and, until a change was set in motion, it was but a fleeting notion in her mind.

Thinking of Tilly in those moments was something Evelyn found painful and heartbreaking. Perhaps a selfish instinct guided her thoughts, urging her to dismiss any feelings of affection and tenderness for the child as foolish, romantic, and inherently improper. Despite the sting of heartache that accompanied the prospect of parting ways with Tilly, Evelyn attempted to convince herself that the little girl would do better under the guidance of an older and stricter schoolteacher than her. Yet, these notions proved hollow and insincere, refusing to resonate with the reality of her own attachment to Tilly.

Tilly was nearly twelve then. Though still a slight child due to malnourishment she had suffered in her early life, in only a few years, she would be considered a woman by the rules of Black Mountain. Evelyn grappled with a sense of duty following the demise of Mr. Baker, addressing letters to his relatives. The sole response arrived from a sister of Matilda's mother, expressing gratitude for the teacher's communication and revealing plans to set sail for the new world across the great Atlantic Ocean with her husband in the coming months.

This meagre foundation served as the basis for Evelyn's fanciful visions of Tilly's future home. The idealistic castle in the air envisioned by Evelyn painted a picture where a loving and sympathetic woman, bound by the ties of kinship, would provide the necessary shelter and guidance for the little girl's seemingly wayward nature. However, when Evelyn shared the contents of the letter with Tilly, the child listened with casual indifference, accepted it obediently, and promptly transformed it into cut-out figures with her scissors. This fanciful artwork, outwardly resembling Amelia, was carefully labelled "the horrible girl" to prevent any potential confusion, before being playfully affixed to the outer walls of the schoolhouse.

As the last days of summer cast their golden hues upon the land and the final harvest graced the valleys, Evelyn felt compelled to reap the fruits of her pupils' burgeoning minds. It was time for her

own school harvest, an occasion also known as the examination. In keeping with tradition, the erudite minds of Thistleford, both scholars and professionals alike, gathered to partake in the timeless custom of placing the young and often timid children before the formidable chalkboard, and interrogating them as in a witness box.

In the scholarly world, where accumulating knowledge is crucial for success, the confident students shine brightest under scrutiny. In this instance, it was not difficult to imagine Tilly and Amy taking centre stage, sharing the limelight and dividing the public's attention. Tilly's strength lay in the clarity of her perception and unwavering self-reliance, while Amy commanded admiration for her placid self-esteem and an almost saintlike way of her appearance.

The remaining school children, however, were marked by timidity and occasional blunders. It was a scene where Tilly's quick-witted brilliance captivated the majority and provoked the loudest applause.

Without the participants knowing, Tilly's passionate answers had unintentionally gained the sympathy of those watching. Onlookers lining the walls and faces peering through the windows were all moved by the unfolding spectacle. The applause, in the end, echoed not only her academic achievement but also the unspoken chord of empathy for Tilly's invincible spirit shining through, reminding all that intellect knows no bounds of birth or status.

But just as Tilly's intellect had captured the imagination of her audience, her popularity faced an abrupt threat from an unanticipated source. Reverend Wallace, a self-invited guest, had injected an element of unexpected drama into the proceedings, and seemed intent on undoing the goodwill she had gained, through fear and intimidation rather than merits of his own.

He took worrisome delight in unsettling the more timid pupils by posing vague and ambiguous questions, all delivered in a stern and sombre voice. Meanwhile, Tilly, undeterred by the ominous atmosphere, had proceeded to explain the celestial heights of astronomy unknown to most of the visitors. With eloquence, she traced the earth's path through the sea of stars and kept measure with the cosmic song sung by spheres in motion. So absorbed was her mind in the harmonies of the heavens that she lost sight of dangers closer to home.

It was then that the dour Reverend Wallace saw fit to insert his disapproving presence. Where others gazed on Tilly in wonder, he seemed intent on casting doubt. As she neared the climax of her lecture, detailing the destinies woven into each planet's orbit, Wallace abruptly reared up with challenge in his eyes.

"Miss Baker! I understood you to say the earth revolves around the sun, as it has since Creation. Is that correct?"

Tilly, exuding an air of scornful confidence, nodded in firm affirmation.

"Well, was that the truth?" Wallace demanded, crossing his arms in a challenging stance.

"It is true," she stated, lips pursed in defiance of his rebuke.

Seated at her desk, Evelyne's saintly face inspired confidence into her little pupil. "Hold your ground, Tilly," she urged her in a hushed whisper, encouraging her to face down the reverend with unwavering convictions against her growing doubt.

The reverend gentleman breathed a deep sigh. His eyes swept across the assembled individuals, casting a glance of empathy at the schoolteacher, followed by a disparaging observation of the children. Finally, his eyes settled on Amy.

The young girl, ever graceful, delicately raised her round, alabaster arm. Its allure was heightened by the presence of a magnificent and expensive bracelet, a gift from one of her uncles in London, proudly worn in celebration of this special day.

Silence fell as eyes turned to Amy. The little girl's cheeks bloomed rosy pink beneath soft white skin, and eyes, vast and radiant, shone bright as a summer sky. The white muslin dress had been fashioned in the latest style, its low scoop neck revealing her fair skin and petite shoulders, creating a vision of innocence and charm.

Amy cast a glance at the gathered crowd before speaking. "Joshua commanded the sun to remain still, and it obeyed him!"

Murmurs of approval swept the schoolroom as triumph reflected on Reverend Wallace's face. Yet shadows fell over Evelyn's brow, and disappointment mirrored the expressions peering through the windows.

Tilly, undeterred, skimmed rapidly over her astronomy textbook, and then slammed the book loudly in defiance. A groan escaped Reverend Wallace, while bewilderment swept through the schoolroom, and a rowdy yell erupted from the windows.

With resolute determination, Tilly brought her little fist down on the desk, "It's a stupid lie. I don't believe it!"

Chapter 8

The prolonged wet season had approached its conclusion, and the telltale signs of spring began to appear all around. Nature, awakening from its wintry slumber, adorned the landscape with burgeoning buds and rushing torrents. In the forests, a fresher fragrance wafted through the air, while the gorse bushes sprouted their golden blooms, and the heathers prepared to don their pinkish spring attire. On the green upland that ascended the southern flank of Black Mountain, the long spike of monkshood emerged proudly from its broad-leaved base, once more shaking its dark-blue bells on the gentle breeze.

Above Baker's final resting place, the willow stood soft and green, its crest adorned with the delicate foam of daisies and buttercups. Over the past year, the little graveyard had welcomed a few new residents, and fresh mounds, neatly arranged two by two along the small paling, now lined the low fence all the way until they reached Baker's lone plot. Yet, by his grave, there remained a solitary mound. General superstition, like a cautious guardian, had shunned this particular spot, leaving the plot beside Baker untouched and vacant.

Meanwhile, throughout the town, several placards had been strategically posted, announcing the imminent arrival of a renowned dramatic company and its troupe of actors. Promising a few days of uproarious and side-splitting farces, the company also promised performances varying between melodrama and a grand extravaganza. This captivating spectacle would encompass a medley of entertainment, featuring singing, dancing, and other acts of merriment. The air buzzed with anticipation as the prospect of a lively presentation enlivened the spirits of the townsfolk, injecting a burst of vivacity into the tranquil rhythm of rural life.

The announcement of the impending theatrical performances stirred a visible excitement among the little folk of the village, and became the focal point of animated discussions and fervent speculation among the pupils during the schoolteacher's lessons. For Tilly, to whom such cultural events were a rare and sacred occurrence, the promise from Evelyn to accompany her to the spectacle prompted an unrestrained joy that lasted throughout the evening, until she was asked to go to bed and have a rest.

As the curtain rose on the performance, a prevailing sense of heavy mediocrity soon became apparent. The melodrama, caught in a precarious balance, failed to descend into the realm of absurdity that would provoke laughter, nor did it ascend to the heights of excellence that could evoke genuine excitement. Yet for Tilly, enthralled in her seat beside Evelyn, it may as well have been a masterpiece. When Evelyn cast a weary glance towards the child, she felt a pang of remorse after noticing the little girl's rapt attention.

The impact on Tilly's inherently excitable nature was profound. With each beat of her panting little heart, the red blood surged through her cheeks. Her small, passionate lips parted slightly in breathless wonder, arching dark eyebrows up beneath widely staring eyes. She did not laugh at the dismal comicalities of the funny man, for Tilly seldom laughed. Her reactions presented a different form of engagement.

The absence of laughter did not detract from the happiness radiating from her; it was as if her joy manifested in a silent, profound appreciation of the performance. For Evelyn, witnessing Tilly's unspoken delight became a source of immense joy. The brightness that illuminated the little girl's face was not only a reflection of the theatrical display, but the fulfilment of Evelyn's most cherished ambition—to know and see Tilly enveloped in happiness.

As the final curtain descended on the makeshift stage, signalling the performance's end, Tilly released a deep sigh of contentment that seemed to echo the culmination of emotions stirred within her. She turned to Evelyn, her expressive dark eyes, veiled momentarily by lowered lids.

"Thank you for coming with me!" she beamed with a half-apologetic smile, and a gesture of weariness that broke the silence left in the aftermath of the play. Then, suddenly, with a simple fluid motion, as if taken back to the enchanting world of the stage, she threw her little arms around Evelyn's neck in a fierce embrace of gratitude.

The walk home towards the Marshes' house passed in quiet reflection. Still feeling restless from the show's mediocre quality, Evelyn, perhaps inspired by a mischievous impulse, found amusement in playfully mocking the entire performance. The temptation to nitpick and judge the play proved irresistible. She couldn't suppress a laugh at the leading actress' exaggerated performance, wondering if Tilly truly believed the character's infatuation with her handsomely dressed admirer.

What a foolish notion, if so! Such a possibility struck Evelyn as both amusing and, if true, somewhat misleading for the unsuspecting Tilly. Yet, at the same time, Evelyn was mindful of the little girl's sensitive nature. Though the production had left her own tastes unsatisfied, its simple charms seemed treasure enough for Tilly's fanciful mind.

"But why?" asked Tilly, looking up at her schoolteacher as they walked back home.

"Well, you see, at his meagre wage I fear the actor could scarcely support his wife, let alone his lavish costumes, which demand weekly expenses for cleaning and maintaining," Evelyn remarked, her tone laced with a hint of wisdom. "Though I wonder if the *countess* is not already wed to the gentleman who takes the coins at the door?"

During this talk, Tilly had quietly taken hold of Evelyn's hand, trying to meet her gaze. Evelyn glanced back at her, smiling, and with subtle irony, occasionally indulged in a sardonic form of humour. Though innocent, in Tilly, too, flickered a hidden glint of sharp wit, finding joy where others saw only solemnity. Recalling the play beneath the deepening dusk, they shared their impressions and hope of seeing similar performances, until at last they reached Mrs. Marsh's door.

Leaving Tilly under the maternal care of Mrs. Marsh, Evelyn declined the offered invitation for refreshments and rest. Her only desire was to plant one last kiss against Tilly's little round cheek, before excusing herself and making her way home with a lingering sense of emptiness without the little girl by her side.

Chapter 9

Two days after the arrival of the drama company, Tilly was late for school. The schoolteacher, who typically embarked on her Friday afternoon walks in the meadows with her favourite little pupil, found this routine disrupted due to the absence of her trustworthy guide.

As she was packing away her books and preparing to depart the schoolhouse, a small voice piped up at her side.

"Excuse me, Miss?"

Evelyn turned to find young Harry Marsh standing there. "Well, little man," Evelyn remarked impatiently, "what is it? Quick!"

"Excuse me, Miss, James and me thinks that Tilly is going to run away again."

"What? Why is that?" asked Evelyn with a touch of unjust temper, a common reaction to unpleasant news.

The young boy explained, "Why, Miss, she don't stay home anymore, and James and I saw her talking with one of those actor fellows. She's with him now. And please, Miss, yesterday she told James and me she could perform as well as Miss Penelora Seraphellianth, the stage actress from the drama company, and she spouted her act right off by heart." The little fellow paused, visibly deflated.

"What actor are you talking about?" Evelyn implored exasperated, evidently hurt by the malicious rumour.

"The fellow with the red hat. And gold pin. And gold chain. And gold tooth," explained the just Harry, who, in his earnestness, replaced commas with periods to extend his breath.

With an unpleasant tightness in her chest, Evelyn donned her gloves and bonnet. Retrieving her umbrella in anticipation of rain, she ventured out on the road, with Harry trotting alongside, struggling to match the pace of his short legs to the strides of the schoolteacher. Suddenly, Evelyn came to an abrupt halt.

"Where have you seen them talking, Harry?" asked Evelyn, still disbelieving the whole story.

"At the Golden Flagon, Miss," answered Harry.

When they reached the main street, Evelyn came to a stop. "Run back home," she instructed the boy. "If Tilly is there, come to the tavern and tell me. If she isn't there, stay at home. Now run!" With that, the excited Harry scampered away, eager to carry out his appointed task.

The Golden Flagon stood just across the way. Within its walls lay both bar and billiard rooms, as well as a dining hall catering to travellers and locals alike. As the young woman crossed the street, she couldn't help but notice the faces of two or three passersby turning and taking note of her presence. A moment of reflection prompted her to discreetly straighten her clothes and tidy her hair, before venturing into the tavern.

Despite the impropriety and potential embarrassment of her mission, it was Tilly that preoccupied her mind. Evelyn bravely composed herself. Every deliberate step was motivated by a single, unwavering resolve to do whatever it took and to go to any length for her beloved little girl.

As she entered the tavern, the barroom hosted the usual assembly of loungers, their astonished eyes turning towards her. Sensing the scrutiny, she was acutely aware of the prying glances. A peculiar tension hung in the air as Evelyn, ever resolute in her purpose, faced the onlookers.

Among the patrons, one man's leering eyes lingered for too long on her, his grin twisting in a manner most distasteful. The persisting stare carried a strange expression, causing Evelyn to momentarily halt. Feeling the weight of that unwavering scrutiny, she returned the look until the impudent observer withdrew his insolent eyes, embarrassed to be caught in such brazen behaviour. The atmosphere in the tavern seemed to shift, and Evelyn, while maintaining her outward composure, could not shake a subtle unease settling within her.

Proceeding through the Golden Flagon, she crossed the barroom with its air thickened by smoke, the vapour of spirits and muffled conversations. She passed through the restaurant area, where muted laughter and the clink of cutlery echoed, before entering the billiard room. A sweeping gaze across the room failed to locate the missing child.

In the dimly lit billiard room, a lone figure stood by one of the tables, head covered with a broad-brimmed red hat. It was none other than the drama company's agent, a vile man of insidious manners, whom Evelyn disliked from the moment she laid her eyes on him.

Convinced that Tilly was not to be found in this room, Evelyn's attention shifted to the man with the red hat. He had already noticed her, but attempted the common trick of feigned unconsciousness, a tactic that invariably failed when employed by those with primitive natures. Nonchalantly balancing a billiard cue in his hand, he pretended to engage with a ball at the centre of the table, attempting to divert attention from the brewing confrontation. Unfazed, Evelyn stood opposite him, waiting patiently until he raised his eyes. When their glances finally met, the schoolteacher advanced towards him.

Initially, Evelyn had intended to avoid a scene or a quarrel, but the welling fear and the impassioned concern for Tilly constricted her throat, slowing her speech to an extent that even her own voice took on a menacing quality. Low and resonant, it sounded far more threatening than she had intended, surprising even the man. The charged atmosphere hung between them, thick with tension, as the encounter teetered on the edge of potential conflict.

"I understand," she began finally, her voice measured yet charged, "that Matilda Baker, an orphan and one of my little scholars, has spoken to you regarding a potential entry into your profession. Is this correct?"

The man with the red hat leaned casually over the billiard table, executing a crafty shot that sent the ball spinning on its own axis. Nonchalantly strolling around the table, he retrieved the ball and deftly placed it back in the designated spot.

This done, he prepared for another shot. "S'pose she has?" he said with an air of indifference.

Rage threatened to choke Evelyn's response, but taking the ball from the table into her gloved hand, she went on. "If you're a gentleman, you should know that I am responsible for her welfare as her guardian. Both you and I understand the kind of life you can offer her. As everyone here can confirm, I've

rescued her from a life worse than death, a life of living on the streets, in poverty, and exposed to dangers and vice. I'm working to provide her with a better life again. Let's have a civilised conversation. She's just a child without a father, mother, sister, or brother. Do you intend to offer her the same?"

The man with the red hat, seemingly indifferent to the gravity of the situation, scrutinised the tip of his cue before looking around for someone to share the joke with him. But Evelyn's stern regard held no warmth for frivolity.

"I know that she's a wayward, headstrong girl," Evelyn continued, though doubt and worry for Tilly threatened to overwhelm her. "But she improves each day and is better now than how she used to be. I believe she truly wants me by her side. I beg you and hope that you refrain from taking any further steps in this matter. I beseech you to leave her under my care. I am willing—"

But here, something tightened within Evelyn, choking off further plea.

Mistaking the schoolteacher's silence, the man with the red hat raised his head with a crude, brutal laugh and barked in a loud voice, "Want her yourself, do you?" he goaded in booming tones. "There must be more to this than the lessons you provide her with!"

The insult lay not just in the words but in the tone, not solely in the glance but in the inherent cruelty of the man. To such a creature, the most understandable language was a blow.

Evelyn sensed this, and with her tense, pent-up energy finding expression in a single act, she struck the brute squarely in his grinning snout with her umbrella. The force of the blow sent the red hat in one direction and the billiard cue in another, while tearing the umbrella from her hand, sending it flying across the floor. The impact left a bloody bruise on the fellow's mouth and ruined the peculiar shape of his beard for some time to come. The echo of the strike reverberated through the room, momentarily shattering the stale air with the sound of retribution.

A sudden commotion disrupted the air. A voice shouting curses, and the unmistakable sounds of feet struggling to regain balance, reverberated through the tavern. The assembled crowd swiftly gathered, creating a temporary throng of onlookers. As quickly as it had converged, the crowd dispersed again, leaving Evelyn standing alone in the aftermath.

Recollections flooded her foggy awareness as she found herself leaning to collect fragments of the broken umbrella with her left hand, while an unknown hand firmly grasped her other. Upon a closer look, the familiar face of Mr. Marsh came into focus.

Regaining her composure, Evelyn followed Mr. Marsh towards the exit. Yet, despite her assent, a moment of hesitation came over her when she tried to express the urgency and the dangerous situation Tilly had found herself in.

"It's all right, Miss Taylor," Mr. Marsh reassured her. "She's home!"

The two stepped out onto the dimly lit street, and as they walked back home, Mr. Marsh recounted how Tilly had come running into the house a few moments before, and had dragged him out, saying that

somebody was trying to kill the schoolteacher at the Golden Flagon. Rushing to the tavern, he arrived just in time to witness the blow delivered to the travelling actor, knocking his wits about him.

Expressing a desire to be alone, Evelyn assured Mr. Marsh that she intended to avoid further trouble that night. They bid each other good night, and Evelyn set along the path leading to the schoolhouse.

Her nature, like that of many sensitive individuals, resonated with an inherent self-interest. The cruel sting of her recent adversary's vile taunt still lingered painfully in the depths of her being. She couldn't shake the thought that others might see her affection for this little girl, and call it what it is. Truth be told, it was rather obvious even to her own unwise judgement and heedless sensibilities.

Deep in her thoughts, Evelyn considered the idea that people might think her sentiment for the child, and the tenderness she showered her with, was improper, reckless, or even criminal. Yet the depth of love for Tilly only grew stronger within her heart with each passing day, becoming more profound than she was willing to confess to anyone, least of all to herself.

After all, hadn't she willingly relinquished her authority as a schoolteacher to win the girl's trust and affection? And what had Reverend Wallace and everyone else been saying about her? Why should she alone challenge the consensus of all and, in the end, tacitly admit the truth of their predictions? The reverend's opinions and the collective judgement of others loomed large, like a storm cloud waiting to burst and drown her in a deluge of her own doing.

Now she even engaged in a brawl in a seedy bar with a common thug, risking her life, to prove what? What had she truly proven? Only what everyone else had already suspected. Those endless hugs, secret kisses, and long walks in the meadows while holding hands hadn't gone unnoticed. And now, what would people say? What would her friends say? What would Reverend Wallace say?

Approaching the school, she found the door ajar. Entering the dimly lit schoolroom, she was even more astonishing to find Tilly, patiently waiting for her within.

In her self-reproach, the last person Evelyn wanted to encounter was Tilly. She entered the room, and walking to her desk, coldly told the child that she was busy and needed to be alone. As Tilly rose, Evelyn took her vacated seat and buried her head in her hands, trying hard to fight tears brimming in her eyes.

When she glanced up again, Tilly was still standing there, looking at her with an anxious expression on her face.

"Did you kill him?" she asked.

"No!" rebuked Evelyn, clearly distressed by such a suggestion.

"You should have," Tilly interjected swiftly.

"I went there to find you, Tilly, not to kill anyone," rebuffed Evelyn in bewilderment. "I was afraid that something might happen to you."

"If you'd asked me, I'd have told you I was off with the play-actors."

Evelyn's distress only deepened, and she looked at her in astonishment. "Why were you off with the play-actors, Tilly?"

"Because you wouldn't tell me you was going away! I knew it. I heard you tell the shopkeeper so. I wasn't a goin' to stay here alone with those Marshes and you gone. I'd rather die first."

With a sweeping gesture that perfectly mirrored her character, Tilly theatrically produced a handful of wilted green leaves from her bosom. Extending her arm to its full length, she spoke with a quick and vivid intensity, reminiscent of a child enrapt with emotion. At the same time, she adopted the peculiar pronunciation of her past life that surfaced when she was particularly agitated.

"This is the poisonous plant you said was dangerous. I'll join the play-actors, or I'll eat this and die right here on this spot. I don't care which. I can't endure this any longer! I won't stay here where they hate and despise me. And you..." her tragic little face reflected all the pain of her young life. "You wouldn't abandon me either if you didn't hate and despise me!"

Tilly's impassioned chest rose and fell, and two substantial tears teetered on the edge of her eyes. Swiftly, she whisked them away with the corner of her apron, treating them as if they were pesky flies.

"If you lock me away in a cell," Tilly declared fiercely, "to keep me from joining the play-actors, I'll end my own life. Father took his own life—why shouldn't I? You claimed a mouthful of that root would kill me, and I always carry it here," she declared and struck her chest with her clenched little fist.

Evelyn's mind wandered to the empty plot adjacent to Baker's grave, thinking of the undeserved fate that awaited the passionate little girl standing before her. Grasping Tilly's hands in her own, Evelyn looked deeply into two hopeless, troubled eyes that met hers.

"I don't despise you, nor do I hate you, Tilly. I could never do such a thing. You have always been dear to me, my beloved girl. Haven't you learned anything? I've loved you all this time, and I would never leave you behind."

Evelyn drew the little girl closer, enfolding her in a warm embrace, and pressing her face against Tilly's chest. The resounding rhythm of Tilly's heartbeat reassured her of that precious existence resting in her arms, and how dear she has grown to her. Without this little heartbeat, Evelyn knew there wouldn't be much reason for her to face another day. In that heartbeat, she found solace and a reason to confront each new day—the resolute vow to do whatever it took to save and protect the precious bond they had forged.

With a quiver in her voice and tears tempting to spill, she looked into Tilly's eyes and asked, "Will you go with me?"

The little girl threw herself with excitement and an irrepressible burst of energy at Evelyn, her little arms folding around her neck, her soft lips kissing her face, and said joyfully, "Yes!"

"And will you promise never to run away again?"

"I promise," came Tilly's earnest assurance.

That very night, cloaked in darkness and unseen by anyone, they stepped, hand in hand, onto the path—the same narrow path that had once led Tilly's weary little feet to the schoolteacher's doorstep. It seemed a path that neither of them should thread alone any longer.

Above them, the stars sparkled with brilliance. The journey ahead held a promise of new beginnings, leaving the echoes of the past to fade away into the night. For better or worse, the lesson had been learned, and in their wake, the doors of the Black Mountain school closed upon them forever.

Epilogue

Evelyn sighed contentedly as she gazed out across the lush meadow, the soft breeze ruffling her hair. It had been a month since their arrival in Beaufort Cove, and still she could scarcely believe their good fortune in finding this quiet haven by the sea.

She turned to Tilly, who was kneeling amongst the wildflowers, tying posies together with nimble fingers. "Well, what do you think of our new home?"

Tilly looked up with a smile. "You're with me, aren't you? That's all I always wanted. I never thought I could be so happy!" she beamed with a smile on her flushed cheeks. "And these fields are great for strolling. We could come here every day and watch fishermen out at the sea."

Evelyn returned the smile and took Tilly's hand in hers. "I'm glad to see your spirits lifted once again. This place seems to agree with us both." She gazed out over the rolling hills dotted with sheep, all the way to the glimmering ocean beyond. Their journey here had been long, but finding refuge in Beaufort Cove had made it worthwhile.

The cottage too had proved a cosy surprise, tucked away at the edge of a grove overlooking the countryside. Simple it might be, but the solid stone walls held a comforting warmth, and they had filled every nook with fragrant flowers from the meadow.

Evelyn was thankful to have found steady work teaching the local children who were eager pupils, and for a better salary than the one she received in Thistleford.

Tilly's lessons had also been progressing well since their arrival. Though unusually quiet and reserved at first, she was beginning to find her voice amongst her peers. Nothing lifted Evelyn's heart more than seeing the joyful spark return to Tilly's eyes, like the first crocuses pushing through the spring grass.

Together they spent long afternoons wandering the cliffs and coves, gathering driftwood or sampling the fresh berries from the woodland. The sea seemed to revive Tilly's spirit in a way Evelyn had never seen, and she looked upon the waves as if they were an old friend.

With the light beginning to fade, Evelyn rose and stretched out a hand to Tilly. "Come, the night draws in and there is a pot of stew waiting for us."

"And a story to read before bedtime," Tilly added with an impish smile.

"And a kiss goodnight for my favourite scholar," Evelyn hugged the little girl closer.

Tilly beamed, tucking her armful of flowers. This place had given them both hope where before was only despair. As they walked hand in hand towards the lamp-lit windows of the cottage, Evelyn knew no choice she had ever made was sweeter than the decision to move from the bleak village of Thistleford, to their new home with the sea at their backs and a bright future unfurling before them like the meadow blooms under the moon.

The End